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ABSTRACT

This combined discussion guide and questionnaire, intended for public or professional audiences, consists of three major sections. The first section is a narrative background description of major issues, options, and arguments for minimum competency testing: Will you test minimum competencies? What competencies will you require? How will you measure them? When will you measure them? How many minimums will you set? How high will you set the minimums? Will you set them for schools or for students? What will you do about the incompetent? The second section contains eight discussion guides with questions and answers. It covers the same topics as the first, but in an outline format, to provide convenient "agenda" for meetings and orderly study guides for completing the questionnaires. The final section is a two-page checklist of the issues and options used for summarizing the choices made while reading the previous sections. This questionnaire allows the user to review the choices made and compare them for consistency against previously held opinions. (Author/CP)

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Let's talk about . . .

MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING

A combination discussion guide and mailable questionnaire to inform and record public and professional thinking on a significant current issue in education.

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Education Commission of the States

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Let's talk about . . .

MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING

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The issues, options, and arguments presented in this publication are intended to assist the user in arriving at decisions in the area of minimum competency testing. The arguments are not necessarily supported by evidence and are constructed solely to stimulate thinking and discussion. The Education Commission of the States offers this material as a mechanism for deliberating an important issue. The Commission has not adopted any official position or policy with respect to minimum competency testing.

1978

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WHAT IS ECS?

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) is a nonprofit organization formed by interstate compact to further working relationships among governors, state legislators and educators for the improvement of education at all levels.

ECS is in business to serve its 46 member states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Periodically, the states ask what ECS can do for them — or what ECS has done. Among the numerous services that are available:

1. Information about state education legislation, program initiatives, legislative studies and court cases affecting education.

ECS is the largest single repository of this type of information and is implementing a 24-hour information answering capability to respond to inquiries about major education issues within one working day.

2. Staff resources in almost all areas of priority state concern.

The highly qualified ECS professional and technical personnel have experience at all levels of government and all fields of education planning, research and program implementation. Whether funded with the fees of member states or supported by foundation and federal grants, all personnel are available to member states for advice and consultation, for program review and analysis. Special briefings or seminar sessions for state officials can be arranged. Staff members travel to states regularly in response to specific state requests.

3. Forums for the examination of critical issues.

ECS sponsors, and often cosponsors with other organizations, a wide range of meetings that bring together political and education leaders from both state and federal levels to exchange ideas and to make policy recommendations about major issues. Through the ECS annual meeting, steering committee meetings, task force meetings, special seminars, inservice training programs and briefing sessions, governors, state education agency personnel, budget officers, college and university administrators, faculty members and legislators meet and work together.

4. Publications and research materials.

ECS develops and distributes each year more than 50 reports and newsletters that provide specialized information needed by state decision makers. Among them are: research briefs summarizing state legislative trends on critical topics; policy-related outlines of alternative approaches to critical problems; timely surveys of current happenings, like *Legislative Review* which appears biweekly during state legislative sessions; *Compact* magazine, which provides leadership perspective on education and politics; and reports like those of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, with information about the status of education in the country today.

5. Technical assistance in selected high-priority areas.

In some highly technical areas, ECS has hard-to-find staff expertise available to the states. The Education Finance Center and National Assessment Project are two specific examples. By special state contract, these projects can provide, for a limited time, expertise most states do not have. In addition, ECS can often identify other individuals working on the problem somewhere in the country and make them available at ECS or state expense.

6. Draft model legislation and executive orders.

Many ECS activities produce legislative alternatives or executive orders in draft form that states can consider as they review or initiate major state programs.

7. Communication with the federal government.

ECS provides a channel for states to the federal government and helps interpret the impact on the states of federal initiatives.

8. An extensive collection of unpublished state materials.

ECS maintains a unique resource collection of primarily unpublished plans and reports on education programs and problems in the states. Although there are not resources to disseminate these materials, member states are encouraged to make use of them in Denver.

9. Publicity for outstanding state practices.

Through the ECS publications program, national attention is often attracted to proven state activities or emerging directions that are unquestionably of worth to other states.

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HOW TO USE THIS COMBINED GUIDE AND QUESTIONNAIRE

This publication consists of three major sections, each of which has a distinct function. The three sections are as follows:

- **Issues, Options, and Arguments**

  This is a narrative description of the choices available in minimum competency testing. It covers the same topics as the Discussion Guides but in a different style. It is background reading for those who prefer essays to checklists and have time to read more than the Discussion Guides.

- **Eight Discussion Guides with Questions and Answers**

  These are eight separate short checklist outlines of the issues, options, and arguments arranged for easy comparison and clear choices. It provides convenient "agenda" for meetings and orderly study guides for filling out the Questionnaire.

- **Questionnaire (Detachable)**

  This is a two-page checklist of the issues and options for **summarizing the choices** made while reading the Discussion Guides. It allows the user to **review the choices** made and compare them for consistency before turning them in. There are three identical perforated copies so that the user can answer more than one time.

Using This Booklet

This publication has many uses with many audiences. Some of them are described below.

Many states and localities have appointed study committees or commissions to give minimum competency testing careful and thorough study. Others have brought people together for a single occasion to consider the issues. This publication is intended to serve both kinds of groups. For simplicity and clarity, most of the plans presented here speak of a single meeting or a single mailing. While it is possible to work through the eight guides in a single event, the book has been deliberately arranged so that a study group can use the guides one at a time in a series of events extending over several weeks or months.

As a Discussion Guide and/or as a Mailable Questionnaire. It can be used either as a discussion guide or as a mailable questionnaire. It is designed to be quickly readable so that it can be used in a meeting, yet it is designed to be self-explanatory so that it does not require a meeting. Of course, it can be used both as a mailable questionnaire before a meeting and then as a discussion guide in a meeting—or vice versa.

With Public and/or Professional Audiences. Written without jargon, the publication can be used with public audiences such as legislative committees, boards of education, special commissions, citizens advisory groups, and parents associations. It can also be used with professional audiences such as administrative staffs, school faculties, professional associations, and university classes in education. And it can, of course, be used with groups of mixed public and professional membership.

Use It as a Discussion Guide

Four possible plans for using this publication to inform and record public and/or professional opinion through discussion are sketched below. The four can be combined in various ways to produce even more plans.

PLAN A. **Check Opinions BEFORE Discussion**

- Distribute copies before the meeting
- Ask discussants to fill out Copy 1 of the Questionnaire and to detach it and mail it to you in advance
- Tally the results and identify the disagreements
- Give the discussion leaders additional information about and special preparation in handling the controversial issues
- Discuss all issues at the meeting

PLAN B: **Discuss Only Disagreements**

- Distribute copies before the meeting
- Ask discussants to fill out Copy 1 of the Questionnaire before they arrive and to detach it
- Collect Copy 1
  - by mail
  - at the door

  and tally the results quickly
- Announce the issues on which there is wide agreement and set them aside
- Discuss only the remaining issues

PLAN C: **Check Opinions AFTER Discussion**

- Distribute copies at the meeting
- Discuss all the issues
- Ask discussants to fill out Copy 1 of the Questionnnaire before they leave
- Tally the results to find any disagreements and decide whether to call more meetings to resolve them

PLAN D: **Check Opinions BEFORE and AFTER Discussion**

- Distribute copies at the meeting
- Ask discussants to fill out Copy 1 of the Questionnaire before they talk
- Collect Copy 1
- Discuss all the issues
- Ask discussants to fill out Copy 2 of the Questionnaire after they talk
- Tally the results and compare them to see whether opinions diverged or converged as a result of the discussion

Use It as a Mailed Questionnaire

Three possible plans for using this publication to inform and record public and/or professional opinion through the mail are outlined below. The three can be combined in various ways to produce even more plans.

PLAN E: **Survey Opinions**

- Mail copies (or hand them out)
- Ask recipients to fill out Copy 1 of the Questionnaire and to detach it and mail it to you (or hand it back to you)
- Tally the results
- Report the agreements and disagreements

PLAN F: **Compare/Contrast Opinions**

- Mail copies (or hand them out)
- Ask recipients to fill out Copy 1 of the Questionnaire and to detach it and mail it to you (or hand it back to you)
- Ask recipients to identify themselves by background and/or position
- Tally the results
- Compare/contrast opinions according to background and/or position

PLAN G: **Converge Opinions**

- Mail copies
- Ask recipients to fill out Copy 1 of the Questionnaire and to detach it and mail it back to you
- Tally the results and mail them to respondents
- Ask recipients to study the results, rethink their opinions, and mail Copy 2 to you with their revised opinions
- Tally the results and mail them to respondents
- Ask recipients to rethink their opinions again and mail Copy 3 to you with their final opinions
- Tally and report the final results

Use It in Education Classes or Local Staff Development Workshops

One possible plan for using this publication in education classes or local staff development workshops is described below. There are others, of course, including all those described above.

PLAN H: **Assign a Paper**

- Ask students to write a critique of the issues, options, and arguments
  - Ask them to supply evidence or expert testimony about the arguments
  - Ask them to develop bibliographic citations
- Ask workshop participants to write a competency testing policy for a local school district
  - Ask them to justify their choices of options
  - Ask them to write a plan and a schedule for starting a competency testing program

CURRENT INTEREST IN MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING

Minimum competency testing for high school graduation and grade-to-grade promotion continues to be one of the most explosive issues on the educational scene today, from the standpoint of both controversy and spread of practice. Probably no concept in recent years has received such widespread attention, either legislatively or by state board adoption.

Enthusiastic proponents believe they have found a way to force greater emphasis on the basic skills and to guarantee that the high school diploma will mean that certain skills and facts will have been mastered by the graduate rather than that the graduate has "put in his or her time." They cannot understand the reluctance opponents have in placing confidence in standardized tests or in "guaranteeing" a certain minimum level of proficiency for all students regardless of ability.

Doubtful opponents generally see the movement as a punitive measure against the schools and as a means of holding the schools and the teachers accountable for results that are dependent on a host of variables over which they have no control. They cannot understand the eagerness proponents have for imposing tests of uncertain validity and unproven reliability which measure only a narrow span of what students are supposed to learn in school and need to succeed in life.

But both groups are beginning to realize how genuinely complex the matter of minimum competency testing actually is. They are coming to see the risks of acting before thinking, of shifting policy without participation, of legislating without study. The rush of legislative amendments and regulatory changes in recently-established competency testing programs offers evidence that more thinking, participation, and study are in order. This publication identifies the major issues, poses the available options, and presents the strongest arguments so as to stimulate that thinking, provide an agenda for that participation, and guide that study.

OTHER ECS PUBLICATIONS

For those interested in more information about minimum competency testing that appears in this publication, these sources will be useful:

Anderson, Barry D., **The Costs of Legislated Minimal Competency Requirements.** Paper prepared for the four regional conferences sponsored by the Education Commission of the States and the National Institute of Education. Fall 1977. $2.75

Green, Thomas F., **Minimal Educational Standards: A Systematic Perspective.** Paper prepared for the four regional conferences sponsored by the Education Commission of the States and the National Institute of Education. Fall 1977. $2.75

Greene, LeRoy F., "The State Assessment Questions – An Answer" **Compact.** Summer 1977. Vol. XI, No. 3.

Kelly, E. W. **The Politics of Proficiency.** Paper prepared for the four regional conferences sponsored by the Education Commission of the States and the National Institute of Education. Fall 1977. $3.00

Education Commission of the States, **Minimum Competency Testing, A Report of Four Regional Conferences.** Postage and handling, $1.50

(List continued next page.)

Pipho, Chris, "Minimal Competency Standards" **Today's Education.** February/March 1978, pp. 34-37. (Not available from ECS.)

Pipho, Chris, "Minimal Competency Testing: A Look at State Standards" **Educational Leadership.** April 1977, pp. 516-520. (Not available from ECS.)

Pipho, Chris, **Update VII: Minimal Competency Testing.** Report No. 105. $6.50

Tractenberg, Paul L., **The Legal Implications of Statewide Pupil Performance Standards.** Paper prepared for the four regional conferences sponsored by the Education Commission of the States and the National Institute of Education. Fall 1977. $2.75

Wise, Arthur E., **A Critique of Minimal Competency Testing.** Paper prepared for the four regional conferences sponsored by the Education Commission of the States and the National Institute of Education. Fall 1977. $2.75

Copies of these reports are available from the Education Commission of the States, Suite 300, 1860 Lincoln St., Denver, Colo. 80295. All prices include $1.50 for postage and handling. Orders are sent library rate and take 2-3 weeks for delivery. All orders must be prepaid. Make checks payable to the Education Commission of the States.

ISSUES, OPTIONS, AND ARGUMENTS for Minimum Competency Testing

1. Will you test minimum competencies?
2. What competencies will you require?
3. How will you measure them?
4. When will you measure them?
5. How many minimums will you set?
6. How high will you set the minimums?
7. Will you set them for schools or for students?
8. What will you do about the incompetent?

This is a narrative description of the choices available in minimum competency testing. It covers the same topics as the Discussion Guides but in a different style. It is background reading for those who prefer essays to checklists and have time to read more than the Discussion Guides.

1. WILL YOU TEST MINIMUM COMPETENCIES?

That is the first question. Should you set minimum standards for student performance in school—or not?

Such standards could be beneficial. They could be used to decide grade-to-grade promotion or to decide graduation. Or to select students for remediation. Or to examine the curriculum and teaching practices for weaknesses. Or to issue different kinds of diplomas. Or to assign students to programs. Or to allocate state financial aid. Or to permit early graduation. Or to restore public confidence in the schools. And those are only some of the uses for minimum standards. But such standards might be harmful. They could send schools backwards to the days when students dropped out if they could not meet the minimum standards. Or they could discredit the schools for what society is doing. Or narrow the curriculum to what is testable. Or drive out creative teaching in favor of routine drill and practice. Or force teachers to concentrate on the bottom of the class at the expense of the top. Or increase the amount of testing time and decrease the amount of teaching time. Or label the disadvantaged as incompetent. Or isolate them in remedial classes.

Individual teachers already set standards in their own classrooms, as we know. Those standards may differ from teacher to teacher, grade to grade, and subject to subject, of course. And since teachers often consider student ability and effort—as well as achievement—they may use different standards from student to student.

The question is whether some general standards reaching across all teachers and all grades and all subjects and all students should be set. These would be comprehensive standards for cumulative learning, standards to be applied even-handedly to all students whatever their pattern of courses. The standards would be expressed in some sort of examination—perhaps a paper and pencil test, perhaps a performance examination, perhaps a combination of the two.

It can be argued that only the individual teacher knows the subject and the materials and the students and their families and the schedule of the day and the atmosphere of the school and the expectations of the community well enough to set standards for a particular group of students—or, better still, for every individual student. No uniform standards set by outsiders can match the standards set by teachers when it comes to realism, fairness, and feasibility. Some would say.

It can be argued, on the other hand, that the outsiders who pay for the school and send their children to it and volunteer their time for it and ask the public to vote for it and hire the graduates of it and pay the colleges to finish what the high school has commenced—those outsiders ought to set minimum standards for it. Some would say.

It doesn't have to be either/or, of course. You could set general standards for the essential knowledge and skills and attitudes that students learn over many years from many teachers of many subjects. And you could let individual teachers set standards for the particular grades and subjects and courses — and students — that they are teaching in a given year. Or you could let the teachers decide promotion from grade to grade and let the outsiders decide graduation from high school. Or you could adopt a sliding scale of standards according to student ability and background.

Or you could not decide at all until you get together to think about it further, discuss the various possibilities, and reach common agreement.

What will it be?

2. WHAT COMPETENCIES WILL YOU REQUIRE?

Begin by distinguishing between school skills and life skills, between the skills it takes to get by in school and the skills it takes to get by in life, between those needed to succeed later in school and those needed to succeed later in life.

There is a difference. And there are different tests for them. Here is a question from a **school skills** test:

- If John has 70 marbles and gives Jose 13 marbles and gets 26 marbles from Slim and gives 38 marbles to Alice, how many marbles does John have left?

And here is an item from a **life skills** test:

- Balance this checkbook by adding these deposit slips and subtracting those cancelled checks.

Both require arithmetic but the first one—although it sounds easier—requires the student to abstract the ideas, decide to add and subtract, and arrange the numbers before making the computation while the second one does not. The first are classic skills of the schoolroom, excellent predictors of success in higher levels of mathematics. In fact, it is more important to set the problem up correctly than to get the right number of marbles—if we are talking about **school skills.**

But if we are talking about **life skills,** getting the bank balance right is everything.

Here is another **school skills** question:

- If there are 77 teeth in 2¾ inches of hacksaw blade, how many teeth are there in 3⅓ inches?

Here is another **life skills** question:

- To saw very hard metal, should you buy a hacksaw with few teeth or many teeth?

The first will indicate whether the student is ready for the next course in school; the second will indicate whether the student is ready for the shopping center. Both are important. Which competencies should you require?

How about school skills for the college-bound and life skills for the job-bound? Or maybe both for everybody? How about school skills for promotion to the next grade and life skills for graduation from school? Or maybe both at every point in school so that every student must climb a stepladder of learning with its rungs held up on two sides: school skills on one side, life skills on the other side?

Of course, there are **basic skills**—such as reading, writing, and arithmetic—used in both school and life, which is why we call them "basic."

FIVE POSSIBLE COMPETENCIES

	SCHOOL SUBJECTS				LIFE AREAS				Total
BASIC SKILLS	Art	Business	English	Etc.	Citizen-ship	Work	Family	Etc.	
Reading									
Writing			(4)				(5)		(3)
Arithmetic									
Etc.									
TOTAL		(1)				(2)			

Thus you have five choices. You could test competency in each:

1. School subject.
2. Life area.
3. Basic skill.
4. Basic skill **applied** in each school subject.
5. Basic skill **applied** in each life area.

The obvious choice is #3: Basic skills. But wait a minute. Look at the others.

- Unless you choose #1, teachers of art and music and science and social studies and foreign languages and driver education and vocational subjects will have no minimum standards.
- Unless you choose #2, teachers can teach about school and not about life.
- Unless you choose #4, students may spell a list of words correctly in English class but misspell them in their science laboratory notebooks.
- Unless you choose #5, students may learn to add and subtract but be unable to balance their checkbooks.

But you can't select them all because schools do not have time and money for that much testing. So choose very thoughtfully. You will have to live with the consequences.

3. HOW WILL YOU MEASURE THEM?

How will you measure the competencies?

The possibilities range from testing with paper and pencil to testing through actual experience. There are some points in between:

1	2	3	4
Paper and Pencil	School Products and Performances	Simulated Performance Situations	Actual Performance Situations

So you have four choices. You could test through:

1. **Paper and pencil tests** in the classroom—what we usually think of as "tests." Most of these measure a narrow band of knowledge or skill and are far removed from performance required in real life. Thus the results may not foreshadow later success in school and life, where success depends on attitudes, values, personal warmth, leadership, creativity, physical strength, and other things a person cannot show with a piece of paper and a pencil. But these tests are quick and easy and cheap and available.
2. **School products and performances.** These are essays, paintings, experiments, clarinet solos, brake jobs, speeches, touchdowns—things students make or do while studying in school. This is better than using paper and pencil because **concrete** accomplishments are used to test knowledge and skills rather than **indicators** of accomplishments in the form of test items. But it takes more time and money to score the results. This is not as good as simulated performance testing because the student usually has had help and because the test pressures are missing. Still, it is easier than arranging special simulations.
3. **Simulated performance** situations set up in the schoolhouse to resemble those in later school or on the job. This is good testing. The student demonstrates minimum competency in artificial situations like the real ones to come. But,

compared to testing in actual performance situations, this is cheaper, takes less time, and gives quicker results to help school and student correct failures. But it isn't perfect: 1) the situations are not real and the results may not match actual performance later, 2) there are few good tests available, and 3) it takes more time and money than using paper and pencil.

4. **Actual performance** situations in later school or on the job. This is ideal "testing." The student demonstrates minimum competency by entering and graduating from the next level of schooling or getting a job and keeping it. The trouble is that such "testing" is expensive; it takes years; and the results come back too late to help either the school or the student.

To summarize, as you move away from paper and pencil and move toward actual performance situations in life, testing becomes harder and costlier, but the test results become more likely to predict later success. Thus a student can fail on a minimum competency paper and pencil test, but pass in the actual performance situations of real life. Remember this later when we talk about using test results to withhold diplomas.

Now, you might want to do this: use simulated performance situations to test **life skills** and use paper and pencil to test **school skills.**

Here's why: taking a paper and pencil test is, in fact, an actual performance situation in school. Indeed, you could call it the most important school skill of all. In that sense, paper and pencil tests are not artificially removed from school, but only from life. Since a student who does well on a paper and pencil test today should also do well in school tomorrow, you may choose to test school skills accordingly.

Remember: different kinds of tests may give you quite different results. So decide carefully.

There is another decision you have to make: will you develop your own tests or use what is available? As you move toward actual performance situations and as you decide to test life skills, you will find fewer and fewer tests to choose from. And vice versa. For instance, you will find many paper and pencil tests of solving science problems, an important school skill, but you will find few simulated performance tests of ethical behavior, an important life skill.

4. WHEN WILL YOU MEASURE THEM?

Will you measure competencies during school or at the end of school:

Do it during school if you believe:

- You want to measure competency to move up from grade to grade in school.
- Students and their parents deserve a distant early warning if there is trouble ahead.
- Administrators need to make changes any time students do not progress: changes in curriculum, course selection, faculty in-service training. Only formal competency tests will alert administrators to unsatisfactory learning early enough to do something about it.

Do it at the end of school if you believe:

- You want to measure competency to move out of school and into the next school or into life.
- Students learn at different rates. All students deserve enough time to reach the minimum.

- Teacher-made tests and daily classroom contact will identify students who are not making progress during school. Formal competency testing is not needed.

Now, you could measure:

- **School skills during school** to decide promotion from grade to grade.
- **Life skills at the end of school** to determine graduation.

Or you could measure **both at the end** if you feel that:

- Even the college-bound should be competent for life (many college students have already started working).
- Even the job-bound should be competent for further school (adults returning to school fill half the college classrooms today).

5. HOW MANY MINIMUMS WILL YOU SET?

Will you set one minimum for all students or will you consider ability, special talents, family background, or other factors we know affect the **learning of students?** Will you set one minimum for all schools or will you consider community characteristics, faculty composition, school spending, or other factors we know affect the **quality of schools?**

Think about student ability as one example. A single standard can be too hard for a dull student yet be too easy for a bright student: impossible for the dull and thus not motivating, trivial for the bright and thus not motivating, objectionable to parents and teachers of the dull, laughable to parents and teachers of the bright—and thus acceptable to none of them.

Using a graduated standard on a sliding scale according to ability will solve all those problems. And it will instantly create others. A graduated standard expects less of some students. "Expect less, get less" is a formula most parents and teachers don't like. A graduated standard will grant a diploma to a dull but energetic student who gets 40 points on the exam and refuse a diploma to a bright but lazy student who gets 60 points on the exam. Moreover, current ability tests may not give fair and accurate measures and thus may not be able to guide expected achievement.

Is there a compromise with the best of both worlds? Yes, but it also has the worst of both worlds. You can use a low minimum for every student regardless of ability and a graduated minimum for students of, say, above-average ability. This does not expect the impossible from anyone but it does expect more from students who clearly can do more. The old problems—such as how to measure ability—are still there, of course.

The identical principles apply to setting single standards vs. graduated standards for schools as for students. A single standard may demand nothing of a wealthy suburban school and the impossible of a poor ghetto school. But a graduated standard may label poor schools as places without hope or give them an excuse for not improving, neither of which is good for students, teachers, administrators or parents.

Perhaps you should set a separate standard for each student, considering his/her

ability, special talents, and background—a standard negotiated among student, teacher, and parent. And perhaps the same for each school—a separate standard negotiated among board, administration, and faculty. Admittedly, the logistics would be formidable.

You may want to arrange several minimums into a graduated sequence to check student progress from grade to grade. Some places are doing that.

Finally, you may want to set a rough, general minimum immediately and then refine it into specifics over the years ahead.

6. HOW HIGH WILL YOU SET THE MINIMUMS?

If you take a cross-section of a school at any grade, you will find that some students are actually performing far above that grade and others far below. Some fifth graders do eighth grade work while others do second grade work. Some twelfth graders do college work while others do sixth grade work. The school is a staircase with one step labelled "seventh," but only half the 12-year-olds are standing on it.

Recently, a group of teachers in one high school made two minimum competency tests for the end of tenth grade: one in English, the other in mathematics. Any student who failed would get remediation, possibly two years of it, and possibly no diploma—good reason for the teachers to make the tests fairly easy and good reason for the students to try hard.

I saw the tests and would say they were about fifth grade—long division, spell "separate," things like that—with a passing score of 60%. Not very hard. When they took the test, about 25% of the tenth graders flunked the English and about 50% flunked the math.

I talked with the teachers and principals afterward:

> "Suppose remediation doesn't work," I said. "Students haven't learned it in five years and may not in two more. Then what? How many diplomas can you withhold at commencement? As many as 20%?"
>
> "Of course not! Parents wouldn't stand for it. The Board, the administration, and the faculty would all cave in under the pressure," they said.
>
> "Then how many diplomas can you refuse? What about 5%?" I said.
>
> "Make that 3%," they said.
>
> "All right, 3%. Then 97% **will have to pass** the minimum competency tests. What can you teachers and principals **guarantee**—not wish—that 97% of all graduates can do?" I said.
>
> "Guarantee? Really **guarantee** for 97%? Well, first grade work, maybe second grade—if you mean a guaranteed minimum," they said.
>
> "Won't that be embarrassing to the school?" I said. "Second grade work?"
>
> "Not as embarrassing as withholding 20% of the diplomas," they said.

You need to understand that, traditionally, minimums are something schools try for, not guarantee. They are goals, not standards. "Zero defects" is not a schoolhouse expression; "each student to his/her own potential" is. And just as that potential has no upper limit, it has no lower limit.

How many students can your school or state afford to remediate--or not promote or not graduate if remediation fails—afford both economically and politically? About 10%, more or less? Certainly it isn't 20%, the percent failing competency tests in many places today. Say it is 5%. Whatever it is, the percent failing the test will probably be

higher. What then? If you can't raise these students to meet the minimum, will you lower the minimum to meet the students? Those are the only two ways to guarantee that 95% will succeed.

You need to think ahead about that. Better select some tests, choose a passing score, make a pilot run with a cross section of students, see how many fail, and decide whether to raise the students or lower the tests. A too-difficult test will embarrass you with too many failures and you will have to cut loopholes in the standard to let students escape—grandfather clauses, setting very low passing scores to start with and raising them year by year, or other loopholes. A too-easy test will embarrass you by being a joke to above-average students, their parents, and the taxpayers.

Don't forget the twelve-year range in the achievement of "twelfth graders." No public school in America has been able to eliminate it.

Oh, yes. There is something else about the minimum. How can you call it a "minimum" if the successful adults in town—butcher, baker, candlestick maker, doctor, lawyer, bureaucrat—cannot pass it? Should you define "successful" adulthood as being off of welfare and out of prison, give the test to a cross-section of adults, and then make the passing score for students equal the lowest score made by any successful adult in town? In short, what do you mean by "minimally competent"? Can you find an adult example of it walking the streets and pick his/her test score as your standard? How could you justify making it any higher?

7. WILL YOU SET THEM FOR SCHOOLS OR FOR STUDENTS?

One state has a new set of reading tests for grades 4, 8, and 12. It wondered what to set as the minimum score on each test. To get the answer, that state set up an independent panel of teachers, administrators, and citizens. The state asked the panel to set a minimum acceptable score for each separate test item. Then it told the panel what it meant by "minimum":

> The minimal acceptable outcome is defined as the percentage of fourth graders you believe **must** be able to respond correctly to the item for you to consider reading instruction to be meeting the **minimal** needs of our students.
>
> If the actual student performance on the item falls below the percentage figure you select, then you would consider present instruction in that skill area to be unacceptable.
>
> In making your decision on minimal acceptable performance, you will want to consider: 1) the importance of the skill being measured by the item; and 2) the intrinsic difficulty of the item itself.

And it gave the panel an example of an item with an acceptable outcome score of 40%. The state said:

> In this example, the estimate for the minimal acceptable outcome is 40%. If the actual outcome were **below** 40%, you would feel very concerned about instruction of the reading skill measured by the particular item.

And if more than, for example, 70% got the answer right, you would feel rather satisfied, the state went on to explain to the panel.

But what about the other 30% who got it wrong? How could the panel possibly be satisfied with the performance of that 30%? The answer is that the panel was not asked to look at that 30% as individual students. It was only asked to look at overall school performance. If 70% of the students got the right answer, that would be good enough for the state. In short, that state wanted a minimum for the school, not for each individual student.

But what will you do: will you judge students or will you judge schools? Must each **person** measure up or must each **program** measure up? Can the school program succeed even though some students fail?

Can you see how important the difference is? It determines whether you will write test items all students can pass or only most students can pass; whether you will test everybody or only a sample; whether you will report results to each individual parent or only to the general public; whether you will settle for a school program that reaches, say, 70% of the students even if that 70% does not include, for example, even one single disadvantaged child; and whether you will modify every unsatisfactory program or fail and recycle every unsatisfactory graduate.

You can see the difference in costs, types of tests, demands on the professional staff to teach every student, pressures on every student to succeed, and political action by parents of every student who fails.

8. WHAT WILL YOU DO ABOUT THE INCOMPETENT?

What will you do about incompetent **students?**

1. Verify the findings independently before acting?
2. Give them several more chances?
3. Lower the standard so they can pass?
4. Remediate so they can pass?
5. Refuse to promote or graduate them until they can pass?
6. Promote or graduate them with a restricted diploma or certificate of attendance?

What will you do about incompetent **schools?**

1. Verify the findings independently?
2. Give them several more chances?
3. Lower the standard so they can operate?
4. Redesign their programs so they will succeed?
5. Refuse to let them operate unless they meet the standards?
6. Let them operate but refuse to accredit them?

You notice the parallels, of course. Whether you are requiring each student to be competent or each school to make a majority of its students competent, you can check the findings, give them another chance to succeed, lower the standards, remediate the program or remediate the students, insist they meet standards before continuing, or let them go on but advertise their shortcomings to outsiders.

If **students,** each incompetent one must be held back, or remediated, or labelled and sent on. If **schools,** current students can be moved on through uninterrupted—most places are doing exactly that, by the way: passing the current crop through without applying their new minimum standards—but, to help future students, the school must be closed, or improved, or left open but have a skull and crossbones painted on the door.

SUMMARY

There is a lot to think about: whether to have a minimum competency program at all, what competencies to test, how to measure, when to measure, one minimum or many, how high the minimums, for students or for schools, and what to do with the incompetent once you find them.

Think carefully.

Eight DISCUSSION GUIDES with Questions and Answers

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These are eight separate short checklist outlines of the issues, options, and arguments arranged for easy comparison and clear choices. They provide convenient "agenda" for meetings and orderly study guides for filling out the Questionnaire.

1

WHETHER COMPETENCY TESTING?

Do you believe that minimum standards should be set for student performance in school? Or do you believe that such standards should not be set?

Individual teachers already set standards in their own classrooms, as we know. Those standards may differ from teacher to teacher, grade to grade, and subject to subject, of course. And since teachers often consider student ability and effort—as well as achievement—they may use different standards from student to student.

The question is whether some general standards reaching across all teachers and all grades and all subjects and all students should be set. These would be comprehensive standards for cumulative learning, standards to be applied even-handedly to all students whatever their pattern of courses. The standards would be expressed in some sort of examination—perhaps a paper and pencil test, perhaps a performance examination, perhaps a combination of the two.

There are arguments for and against standards. What do you think? Check your preferences.

You may not feel you can make a decision without studying the other seven questions in these Guides. Why not do this: answer Question 1 **tentatively,** work your way through the remaining seven questions, then return and reconsider your answer to Question 1.

OPTION 1A ☐ Minimum standards SHOULD be set.

- The time has come to put an end to automatic promotion and automatic graduation and to set a floor under student achievement. Fifty years of passing students through the system whether they learn anything or not is long enough.

- Teachers—and school administrators—should be put on notice as to what teachers must teach. Students—and their parents—should be put on notice as to what students must learn.

- Outsiders—employers, admissions officers at other schools, the general public—deserve to know that a school graduate knows something. A diploma should be proof of learning rather than proof of attendance.

- The basic skills will once again be placed at the heart of the curriculum if students have to pass competency tests in them.

- The widespread decline in school learning will be halted, and the continuing rise in school costs will become less objectionable to taxpayers.

OPTION 1B ☐ Minimum standards SHOULD NOT be set.

- The variety in student abilities, special talents, interests, and backgrounds is far too great to allow a standard.
- The schools will be blamed for low scores even though society may be causing them. Diverting attention from the real causes will delay solutions to the problem.
- The curriculum will be narrowed to what is testable, and the teachers will be teaching to the tests. Diversity in the curriculum will shrink, and creativity in teaching will shrivel.
- Teachers will concentrate on students at the bottom and try to lift them up to the minimum—at the expense of other students.
- Testing time will be increased and teaching time will be decreased. The only real beneficiaries will be the testing companies.
- The disadvantaged will become even more disadvantaged when singled out and labelled for failing to meet the minimum. Mainstreaming the handicapped will become even more difficult because teachers will fear their effect on the test scores of other children.

OPTION 1C ☐ Further study and discussion should precede any decision.

- We need time to study the possible gains and losses, consider alternatives, understand all points of view, and educate each other.
- We ought to debate the entire set of issues in this booklet, and perhaps other issues as well, before settling any one issue—including whether to have standards at all.
- Setting standards is one thing; meeting them is another. One party may set them, but it will take all parties to meet them. We had better agree before anybody moves ahead.
- We ought to examine the experience of those states and local school districts which have had competency testing programs underway for several years.
- A broad survey of public and professional opinion on the issues should precede any decision.
- We need to determine whether competency tests are valid and reliable before deciding.

2

WHAT COMPETENCIES?

Do you believe that minimum standards should be set for the school subjects, for the life areas, for the basic skills—or perhaps for all of them? Or do you believe the standards should be set for basic skills **applied** in school subjects or **applied** in life areas?

There are five possibilities. All five are important. But they differ. And there are different tests for them.

The school subjects—art, business, science, etc.—provide the content to be taught and are the organizers of the school curriculum.

The life areas—family, work, citizenship, etc.—provide the reason for going to school and are the organizers of adult life.

The basic skills—reading, writing, arithmetic, etc.—are used both in school and in life, which is why we call them "basic."

The basic skills APPLIED in each school subject—reading in social studies, writing in industrial arts, arithmetic in science—are the actual daily experience for the student and thus a sensible context for testing minimum competency.

The basic skills APPLIED in each life area—reading a contract, writing a business letter, checking a department store bill—are the actual daily experience of adults and thus a sensible context for testing minimum competency.

What competencies should you require? Remember: what you put into the tests, the administrators will ask the teachers to put into the curriculum, the board will hold the administrators responsible for, and the public will regard as what the board values most.

What do you value most? Check your preferences.

OPTION 2A ☐ School subjects

- They are the classifications of knowledge.
- They are the specialties of the teachers.
- They are the compartments of the school day.
- They are the names of the school books, the topics of the school tests, the segments of the school report card.
- Master them and you know everything worth knowing.
- Without standards for every subject, teachers of art and music and science and social studies and foreign languages and driver education and vocational subjects will have no minimums.

OPTION 2B ☐ Life areas

- Success in them is the purpose of schooling.
- Attention to them keeps schooling from becoming abstract, academic, detached from life.
- Focusing on them gives students a reason to study.
- Failing in them is the only legitimate reason for withholding a diploma.
- Master them and you are ready for life.
- Without standards for every life area, teachers can teach about school and not about life.

OPTION 2C ☐ Basic skills

- They are fundamental for clear thinking.
- They are essential for clear communication.
- They are required in every school subject.
- They are needed in every life area.
- Without them you cannot be called "competent."
- Master them and you can learn everything else.

OPTION 2D ☐ Basic skills **applied** in each school subject

- The basic skills are tools for learning the school subjects.
- They should be **taught** and **tested** in the context of school subjects—not as something separate.
- Students who cannot read in social studies, write about literature, and do arithmetic in science are not ready for further schooling in those subjects.

OPTION 2E ☐ Basic skills **applied** in each life area

- The basic skills are tools for handling everyday life tasks.
- They should be **taught** and **tested** in the context of practical everyday applications—not as something separate.
- Students who cannot read a road map, write a job application, and balance a checkbook are not ready for life as family members, workers, and citizens.

3

HOW MEASURED?

The possibilities for measuring competencies range from testing with paper and pencil to testing through actual experience. There are some points in between:

1. **Paper and pencil tests** in the classroom—what we usually think of as "tests"
2. **School products and performances.** These are essays, paintings, experiments, clarinet solos, brake jobs, speeches, touchdowns—things students make or do while studying in school
3. **Simulated performance situations** set up in the schoolhouse to resemble those in later school or on the job
4. **Actual performance situations** in later school or on the job

As you move away from paper and pencil and toward actual performance situations, the testing becomes harder to arrange and costlier, but the test results become more likely to predict later success. The reverse is also true. That is, a student may fail on a paper and pencil test but pass in the actual performance situations of real life. Remember this when you consider using test results to withhold diplomas.

Each kind of test has its good points. But different kinds may give you quite different results. Which kind will you use?

Before you answer, consider this: you might want to use one kind of test for minimum competency in basic skills and school subjects but use another kind for life areas. For example, you could use paper and pencil tests for basic skills and school subjects but use simulated performance situations to test for life areas.

Check your preferences.

OPTION 3A ☐ Paper and pencil tests for

- ☐ School subjects
- ☐ Life areas
- ☐ Basic skills
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in school subjects
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in life areas

- They are readily available.
- They are cheap to buy or to make and they are cheap to score.
- They give immediate results to help students and teachers correct shortcomings.
- Taking a paper and pencil test is an **actual performance situation** in school—perhaps the most important performance of all.
- Paper and pencil test results are excellent predictors of success in later school.

OPTION 3B ☐ School products and performances for

- ☐ School subjects
- ☐ Life areas

- ☐ Basic skills
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in school subjects
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in life areas

- They are readily available in great quantity at no cost.
- They are the natural by-products of instruction and thus do not require the arrangements, interruptions, time, and costs of every other form of testing.
- They give immediate results.
- They measure a broad band of knowledge, skills, and attitudes.
- They are produced in fairly natural circumstances. Thus the results are likely to resemble actual performance in later life—and especially in later school.

OPTION 3C ☐ Simulated performance situations for

- ☐ School subjects
- ☐ Life areas
- ☐ Basic skills
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in school subjects
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in life areas

- They can test all school subjects.
- They can test all life areas.
- They can test leadership, physical strength, creativity, "stage presence," moral judgment, and other things that can be shown only through performance.
- They give immediate results.
- The results are excellent predictors of success in later life.

OPTION 3D ☐ Actual performance situations for

- ☐ School subjects
- ☐ Life areas
- ☐ Basic skills
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in school subjects
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in life areas

- The tests have perfect validity. That is, there is no doubt about the test results predicting future performance: the results are identical to success in life.
- They can test all life areas.
- They can test leadership, physical strength, creativity, "stage presence," moral judgment, and other things that can be shown only through performance.
- They measure the lasting, important effects of schooling.
- They take no time away from teaching.

④
WHEN MEASURED?

Competencies can be measured **during school** or **at the end of school** or both. Or some can be measured during school and others at the end of school. What will you do?

During School. Competency tests can be given at every grade K-12 or at selected grades such as 3, 6, 9, and 12. That is, they can be scheduled to parallel the content and sequence of the school curriculum either year by year or at major terminal points such as the end of the primary grades, the intermediate grades, the junior high grades, and the senior high grades. These tests can be matched to the curriculum—that is, to the specific subject content—of the grades selected for testing. This plan also allows the results to be used to monitor and report student learning annually or periodically and to guide such important decisions about students as promotion, remediation, and placement in special programs.

At the End of School. A competency test can be given in the final year of high school. The same test (or equivalent "forms" of the test) can also be given a year or two earlier—in grades 10 and 11, for example—to allow time for correcting deficiencies so that students can pass the test in grade 12. This test can be a comprehensive final examination measuring the cumulative effect of all the years of schooling in order to determine whether the student is able to move on to further schooling, a job, and/or home and family responsibilities.

While competency tests given during school tend to be related to the school curriculum, competency tests given at the end of school tend to be related to the requirements of adult life or the next level of schooling. In that sense, competency tests given at the end of school tend to be "outer-directed," drawing their content from life outside the school, while those given during school tend to be "inner-directed," drawing their content from life inside the school. Each has its advantages. Which advantages appeal to you?

Check your preferences.

OPTION 4A ☐ During school

- ☐ School subjects
- ☐ Life areas
- ☐ Basic skills
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in school subjects
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in life areas

- A series of competency tests can be arranged in a graduated sequence of difficulty to motivate students to do better year after year.

- Students who cannot pass the tests can be scheduled for early remediation or special programs before they fall further behind.

- The results can be used to decide promotion from grade to grade.

- A legal basis can be established for non-promotion or non-graduation in later years because parents and students can be warned early—and repeatedly, if necessary—that progress is not satisfactory.

- The tests can parallel the content and sequence of the school curriculum, providing checkpoints annually or periodically to see whether the curriculum is properly designed.

- The results can be used to modify the school curriculum year by year as weak spots can be precisely located and corrected.

- Administrators need to make changes any time students do not progress: changes in curriculum, course selection, faculty in-service training. Only formal competency tests administered during school will alert administrators to unsatisfactory learning early enough to do something about it.

OPTION 4B ☐ At the end of school

- ☐ School subjects
- ☐ Life areas
- ☐ Basic skills
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** to school subjects
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** to life areas

- Students learn at different rates. All students—including slow learners—deserve enough time to reach the minimum and should not be labelled as "incompetent" by being tested prematurely.

- The cumulative effect of the complete school curriculum can be checked.

- Students are old enough to be tested on life skills used by adults.

- The tests can be related directly to what graduates will be required to do as they move out of school and on to the next school, a job, or maintaining a home. This is the best possible justification for the content of the tests.

- The test results report the kinds of knowledge, skills, and attitudes with which employers are directly concerned—the entry-level skills needed to begin a job well and go on to learn other jobs later.

5

HOW MANY MINIMUMS?

Will you set a single standard for all students or will you consider student ability, special talents, family background, or other factors which affect learning?

A single standard would establish a uniform level of acceptable performance for all students regardless of ability or talent or background. It would stand as a working definition of minimum competency and would establish the body of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed by every person to succeed in school or in later life. It would represent a universal expectation to be met by all students—or by all schools—regardless of circumstance.

In contrast, a set of standards graduated according to ability or family background, for example, would expect less of those who can do less and would expect more of those who can do more. Similarly, a set of standards differentiated according to special talents or special interests, for example, would take into account different "achievement profiles" for individual students and would allow them to demonstrate an acceptable "pattern of competency" rather than requiring all of them to reach the identical point on the identical standard.

In choosing between single standards and multiple standards, you need to decide whether the idea of "minimum competency" can be reconciled with the idea of graduated standards or differentiated standards. You also have to consider what measure of ability or family background you might use to set graduated expectations and what measure of special talents or special interests you might use to set differentiated expectations.

Consider family background—well-established as an influence on student learning. You may feel that a single standard ignoring family background would be grossly unfair. Or you may feel that graduated standards considering family background would be grossly unfair because they would expect the children of the rich and the poor to leave school as far apart as when they came in.

The same thing is true about special talents or special interests in art or sports or music or history or automobile repair or writing. You may feel that a single standard ignoring them would be unfair by expecting athletes to write or writers to play ball equally well. Or you may feel that differentiated standards would be unfair by demanding more just because a student has the potential—not because more is needed for later success in school or life.

You will meet the same problems in setting standards for schools. (Discussion Guide 7 poses the choice of setting standards for schools or for students.) You have to consider the possibility that a single standard may demand nothing of a wealthy suburban school and the impossible of a poor ghetto school. But you also have to consider the possibility that graduated standards may place a halo—or a dark cloud—around a school and leave it there forever. One other point: you need to consider that graduated standards may approve a low-potential / high-achieving school but disapprove a high-potential / low-achieving school—even though the second school is achieving far higher than the first, thanks to its far greater potential.

Should you solve the problem by setting a separate standard for each student, considering his/her ability, family background, special talents, or special interests—a standard negotiated among student, teacher, and parents? Should you do the same if you set a standard for a school rather than for students—should it be a separate standard negotiated among board, administration, and faculty?

Those are your options. Check your preferences.

OPTION 5A ☐ Single standard for all

- A minimum is a minimum. No student can be allowed to fall below it regardless of ability; no student should be required to rise above it because of ability.
- Those who participate in setting standards—teachers, administrators, parents, students, employers, taxpayers—cannot handle the complexity of setting multiple standards.

OPTION 5B ☐ Graduated standards according to

☐ Ability

☐ Family background

- Student ability and family background have been firmly established as two powerful influences on school learning. Setting standards without considering each of them would be unfair both to the advantaged and to the disadvantaged.
- Diversity in curriculum is more likely to be maintained if there are multiple standards.

OPTION 5C ☐ Differentiated standards according to

☐ Special talents

☐ Special interests

- Each student's "profile" of talents and interests is different; each student is good at some things, not all things. Differentiated standards recognize this.
- Teachers, students, and parents with a special interest in sports or music or cooking or computers can participate more fully in setting minimum competency standards.

OPTION 5D ☐ Negotiated standards

- The process of having teachers, a student, and his/her parents negotiate a minimum standard for his/her achievement will improve mutual understanding, mutual purposes, and—most important—the likelihood that the standard will be met. The same applies to standards negotiated for schools by school boards, administrators, and faculty members.
- Negotiating standards is most likely to result in individualized instruction.

6
HOW HIGH THE MINIMUMS?

A minimum cannot be set by naming a grade level as if it were a level of achievement. We cannot, for example, base high school graduation on achieving at the "9th grade level." The reason is that there is a very wide range in achievement among 9th graders: some 9th graders are achieving at the 6th grade level; other 9th graders are achieving at the 12th grade level. Similarly, we cannot require "4th grade achievement" for promotion to the 5th grade.

The standard must be drawn from some other source and expressed in some other manner. There are at least three distinct possibilities. But they differ significantly.

Judgments by Informed Adults. It is possible to bring together a representative cross-section of adults—teachers, administrators, parents, recent graduates, employers, taxpayers—and have them deliberate about how high the minimum competency standards should be. It is equally possible to bring together a group of leading adults rather than representative adults, reasoning that the leaders are best able to judge what adults need to be able to do in the future. Either way, the standard they select can be most clearly expessed as a minimum acceptable passing score on a test they have examined very carefully. This need not be a paper and pencil test; it could be a set of observation guides for judging adult performance.

Actual Test Performance of Successful Adults. It is possible to bring together a representative cross-section of adults—or a group of leading adults—and have them take the minimum competency test. It is also possible to send observers out to watch adults—typical adults or leading adults—perform at college or on the job or at home and to judge their actual performance by using rating scales.

The minimum acceptable passing score can then be set by adopting the average score or the lowest score or some other score of the adults taking the tests or being rated. The scores can, of course, be analyzed to help in adopting the minimum acceptable passing score. For example, scores obtained by adults holding marginal jobs can be rejected as too low, given the fact that such jobs will disappear in future years and that a higher level of competence will be needed to succeed at work.

Acceptable Failure Rate. It is possible to set a minimum acceptable passing score arbitrarily, depending upon the number of "failures" the schools are able to handle.

For example, the schools may not be able to afford remedial attention for more than, say, 10% of the students. Those schools should set the passing score low enough so that only 10% fail on first testing. Again, the school may be unable or unwilling to refuse promotion or graduation to more than, say, 3% of the students on final testing. Those schools should set the passing score low enough so that only 3% of the students fail on final testing.

Check your preferences.

OPTION 6A ☐

Based on judgments by informed adults

- The most sensible standards can be arrived at by pooling judgments, which takes into account multiple perspectives on what it takes to succeed in further schooling and/or later life.

- The process of having a group of adults arrive at standards by common agreement will improve mutual understanding, mutual purposes, and—most important—the likelihood that the standards will be met.

OPTION 6B ☐

Based on actual test performance of successful adults

- The most realistic standards can be set by testing the performance of successful adults and setting the standards accordingly.

- No passing score can be called a "minimum" if successful adults cannot reach it. The actual performance of the least successful adult is true minimum competency.

OPTION 6C ☐

Acceptable failure rate

On first testing	On final testing
☐ 1%	☐ 1%
☐ 3%	☐ 3%
☐ 5%	☐ 5%
☐ 10%	☐ 10%
☐ 20%	☐ 20%
☐ Higher	☐ Higher

- The school must exert reasonable control over the task it undertakes in making students competent. The only way to control the size of that task is to establish an acceptable failure rate based on actual experience with competency tests.

- Efforts ought to be directed to students at the very lowest levels of performance. Only by setting an acceptable failure rate can the school be sure to give help to those students who need it most.

7
FOR SCHOOLS OR FOR STUDENTS?

Minimum competency testing is usually thought of as setting standards for individual students. But standards could be set for entire schools instead. The choice is extremely important, partly because it determines how the testing will be carried out and partly because it determines how the results can be used. There are at least 10 differences.

Test Difficulty. A test each student must pass must be easier than a test each school must pass. For example, getting 70% of the test items correct might be a reasonable standard for an individual student. An equally reasonable standard for a school might be getting 70% of the students to get 70% of the test items correct. It is far harder for an individual student to meet that standard than for a school to meet that standard. Thus, a more difficult test can be used for the school.

Sampling. Testing a sample of students will be sufficient to determine whether the school is performing satisfactorily, whereas each student must be tested to determine if he or she is performing satisfactorily.

Reporting. Results for schools will be reported to the general public,whereas results for individual students must be reported to each separate family.

Corrective Steps. Remedial efforts in the first case will be directed to the school program, whereas remedial efforts in the second case must be directed to each student.

Costs. For those reasons, it will cost far less to establish competent performance by a school than to establish competent performance by each student.

Who Gets Help. If standards are set for schools, many students may go without help, whereas if standards are set for students, each student must be helped.

Pressures on Teachers. Teachers will be under far less pressure if they are obligated to get a majority—even a large majority—of students to perform competently than if they are obligated to get every single student to perform competently.

Pressures on Students. Some students may escape pressure entirely if other students perform well enough to let the school meet its standard, whereas such students will not escape pressure if they must each meet the standard.

Pressures on Parents. Similarly, some parents may escape pressure if other parents perform well enough to help the school meet its standard, whereas those same parents cannot escape pressure if each family must meet the standard.

Political Action by the Incompetent. While the total community may rise to the attack if a school is declared incompetent, only individual parents may rise to the attack if individual children are declared incompetent. Total community action would be far more powerful, of course, but it is far less likely since schools are more likely than individual students to meet standards.

Check your preferences.

OPTION 7A ☐ Schools

- Applying standards to schools is a reasonable and conservative way to begin minimum competency testing.
- The amount of energy and money needed to correct school deficiencies will be far less than that needed to correct the individual student's deficiencies.

OPTION 7B ☐ Students

- The entire idea is to help individual students. Correcting school program shortcomings can still leave many students unreached.
- The attention of teachers, remedial specialists, parents—and students themselves—can be focused on individual cases far more readily than on entire programs or whole schools.

8

WHAT TO DO WITH THE INCOMPETENT?

There are six distinct steps you can take once you locate incompetent students or incompetent schools. Which is your choice?

Verify the Findings. You might give another test to be sure that the findings are correct, especially if you have any doubt about the quality of the competency test itself or about the attitude of the students when taking it or about the conditions under which it was given. You might re-test immediately or wait until the same time next year.

Give More Chances. You might simply notify students—or schools—that they did not perform well and that they will be given another chance to pass after time elapses. This would be a reasonable step if you believe that those found incompetent will improve through maturation or personal initiative or help from family and friends.

Lower the Standards. You might drop the minimum acceptable passing score low enough so that those students—or schools—first declared incompetent are declared competent. This would make sense if you feel that you made the passing score unrealistically high the first time around. It would also make sense if you could not handle the number of incompetents identified by the first passing score.

Redesign Programs/Remediate Students. You might modify the school program to make it more effective in reaching all students—especially those at the bottom of the achievement scale—if you have set standards for schools. Similarly, you might provide remedial help to individual students if you have set standards for them. Those steps make sense if you believe that the problem lies in the school program rather than in the competency tests themselves.

Stop School Operations/Stop Student Advancement. You might suspend the operations of the school—or actually close it—as a means of eliminating incompetent performance if you are dealing with schools. Similarly, you might refuse promotion or graduation to students rather than move incompetents through the system or out of it into the adult world. Those steps would make sense if you feel that the school program could not be corrected or if there were too little time left to remediate student deficiencies before they moved on to the next grade or left the system entirely.

Refuse Accreditation/Refuse Diploma. You might allow an incompetent school to continue operating but refuse to accredit it. Similarly, you might allow a student to graduate but refuse to grant a diploma, issuing a certificate of attendance instead. Those would be reasonable steps if you feel that it would be impossible or not worthwhile to correct the deficiencies or to prevent the school or person from continuing.

Check your preferences.

OPTION 8A ☐ Verify findings

- ☐ Schools
- ☐ Students

- Given the lack of experience with minimum competency testing and the probability that the first tests may not be trustworthy, verifying the findings by administering a second test is fair and reasonable before going further.
- Those identified as incompetent will be less likely to overturn the findings if they are based on two testings.

OPTION 8B ☐ Give more chances to pass

- ☐ Schools
- ☐ Students

- The first test serves to identify students who are not performing satisfactorily so that teachers can help them.
- The first test serves to alert students and parents so that they can arrange for help outside of school—or simply have the student try harder the second time.

OPTION 8C ☐ Lower standards

☐ Schools

☐ Students

- It is unlikely that the correct minimum acceptable passing score can be established at first—either by using adult judgment or adult test performance or an arbitrary standard. Moving the passing score downward is a sensible adjustment until we learn what to expect.
- Early expectations are likely to be unrealistically high. As the time and costs of remediation become evident, standards will have to move downward.

OPTION 8D ☐ Redesign programs/remediate students

☐ Schools

☐ Students

- The sole purpose of competency testing is to locate and help the incompetent. That can only be done through improving school programs and remediating deficient students.
- Only when that remedy has been exhausted should we take other steps.

OPTION 8E ☐ Stop school operations/ stop student advancement

☐ Schools

☐ Students

- The first step should be to prevent incompetent schools or incompetent students from continuing as they are. Nothing less will persuade them—and those responsible for them—that they must improve.
- Delaying this step will delay improvement and defeat the purpose of minimum competency testing.

OPTION 8F ☐ Refuse accreditation/refuse diploma

☐ Schools

☐ Students

- The desire for accreditation on the part of schools and the desire for diplomas on the part of students are sufficiently motivating to cause better performance if they are withheld.
- Granting accreditation or diplomas to the incompetent serves notice to those further upstream that the purpose of the testing is not serious, that the standards are not real, and that they need not be met.

QUESTIONNAIRE
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Copy 1 33
Copy 2 35
Copy 3 37

(Copies of the Questionnaire are perforated for easy removal and return.)

This is a two-page checklist of the issues and options for **summarizing the choices** made while reading the Discussion Guides. It allows the user to **review the choices** made and compare them for consistency before turning them in. There are three copies so that the user can answer more than one time.

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CHECK ONE OR MORE BOXES UNDER EACH OF THE EIGHT QUESTIONS.

(1) WHETHER COMPETENCY TESTING?

OPTION 1A ☐ Minimum standards SHOULD be set.
OPTION 1B ☐ Minimum standards SHOULD NOT be set.
OPTION 1C ☐ Further study and discussion are needed.

(2) WHAT COMPETENCIES?

OPTION 2A ☐ School subjects
OPTION 2B ☐ Life areas
OPTION 2C ☐ Basic skills
OPTION 2D ☐ Basic skills **applied** in school subjects
OPTION 2E ☐ Basic skills **applied** in life areas

(3) HOW MEASURED?

OPTION 3A ☐ Paper and pencil tests for
- ☐ School subjects
- ☐ Life areas
- ☐ Basic skills
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in school subjects
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in life areas

OPTION 3B ☐ School products and performances for
- ☐ School subjects
- ☐ Life areas
- ☐ Basic skills
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in school subjects
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in life areas

OPTION 3C ☐ Simulated performance situations for
- ☐ School subjects
- ☐ Life areas
- ☐ Basic skills
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in school subjects
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in life areas

OPTION 3D ☐ Actual performance situations for
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- ☐ Basic skills
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in school subjects
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in life areas

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(4) WHEN MEASURED?

OPTION 4A ☐ During school
- ☐ School subjects
- ☐ Life areas
- ☐ Basic skills
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in school subjects
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in life areas

OPTION 4B ☐ At the end of school
- ☐ School subjects
- ☐ Life areas
- ☐ Basic skills
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in school subjects
- ☐ Basic skills **applied** in life areas

(5) HOW MANY MINIMUMS?

OPTION 5A ☐ Single standard for all

OPTION 5B ☐ Graduated standards according to
- ☐ Ability
- ☐ Family background

OPTION 5C ☐ Differentiated standards according to
- ☐ Special talents
- ☐ Special interests

OPTION 5D ☐ Negotiated standards

(6) HOW HIGH THE MINIMUMS?

OPTION 6A ☐ Based on judgments by informed adults

OPTION 6B ☐ Based on actual test performance of successful adults

OPTION 6C ☐ Acceptable failure rate

On first testing	On final testing
☐ 1%	☐ 1%
☐ 3%	☐ 3%
☐ 5%	☐ 5%
☐ 10%	☐ 10%
☐ 20%	☐ 20%
☐ Higher	☐ Higher

(7) FOR SCHOOLS OR FOR STUDENTS?

OPTION 7A ☐ Schools

OPTION 7B ☐ Students

(8) WHAT TO DO WITH THE INCOMPETENT?

		Schools	Students
OPTION 8A	Verify findings	☐	☐
OPTION 8B	Give more chances to pass	☐	☐
OPTION 8C	Lower standards	☐	☐
OPTION 8D	Redesign programs/remediate students	☐	☐
OPTION 8E	Stop school operations/stop student advancement	☐	☐
OPTION 8F	Refuse accreditation/refuse diploma	☐	☐

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A Division of the Academy for Educational Development

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